
THE BALKAN EXPRESS

FRAGMENTS FROM THE
OTHER SIDE OF WAR

Slavenka Drakulić

THE BALKAN EXPRESS
FRAGMENTS FROM THE
OTHER SIDE OF WAR

W · W · NORTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK LONDON

Copyright © 1993 by Slavenka Drakulić
First American Edition 1993

*A Dinner at the Harvard Club, Paris—Vukovar, It's Hard to Kill a Man, My Mother Sits in
the Kitchen Smoking Nervously, An Actress Who Lost Her Homeland, If I had a Son, What
Ivan Said* translated from the Croatian by Maja Soljan

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Manufacturing by The Haddon Craftsmen Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Drakulić, Slavenka, 1949–

Balkan express : fragments from the other side of war / Slavenka
Drakulić. — 1st American ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Yugoslavia—History—Civil War, 1991– 2. Drakulić, Slavenka,

1949– . I. Title.

DR1313.D73 1993

949.702'4—dc20 92–42505

ISBN 0-393-03496-8

W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

By the same author

HOLOGRAMS OF FEAR

HOW WE SURVIVED COMMUNISM AND EVEN LAUGHED

TO MY DAUGHTER RUJANA

He worked by the barbed wire and heard awful screams.

His field was there?

Yes, right up close. It wasn't forbidden to work there.

So he worked, he farmed there?

Yes. Where the camp is now was partly his field. It was off limits, but they heard everything.

It didn't bother him to work so near those screams?

At first it was unbearable. Then you got used to it.

Dialogue with a villager from present-day Treblinka about living close to the concentration camp at the time of extermination of the Jews (from *Shoah – the Complete Text of the Film* by Claude Lanzmann, Pantheon Books)

CONTENTS

	<i>Introduction</i> THE OTHER SIDE OF WAR	1
1	A DINNER AT THE HARVARD CLUB	5
2	MY FATHER'S PISTOL	10
3	A BITTER CAPPUCINO	17
4	DEAD SILENCE OF THE CITY	22
5	ON BECOMING A REFUGEE	28
6	THE BALKAN EXPRESS	35
7	PARIS-VUKOVAR	42
8	OVERCOME BY NATIONHOOD	49
9	THE SMELL OF INDEPENDENCE	53
10	IT'S HARD TO KILL A MAN	60
11	MY MOTHER SITS IN THE KITCHEN SMOKING NERVOUSLY	68
12	AN ACTRESS WHO LOST HER HOMELAND	76
13	IF I HAD A SON	86
14	WHAT IVAN SAID	95
15	AND THE PRESIDENT IS DRINKING COFFEE ON JELAČIĆ SQUARE	106
16	THE WOMAN WHO STOLE AN APARTMENT	114
17	A LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER	125
18	HIGH-HEELED SHOES	137

Introduction

THE OTHER SIDE OF WAR

Barely a year and a half ago I was sitting in my apartment in Zagreb, looking at CNN reports from Baghdad and thinking, ‘God, how could those people live there?’ For many years I’d wondered the same about Beirut. Now I am sitting in the same place watching CNN reports on Sarajevo or Slavonski Brod, but I don’t ask myself that question any more. After a year of war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, after the destruction of entire cities like Vukovar, after the shelling of Osijek and Dubrovnik, foreign friends ask me, ‘How is it possible to live in a country at war, how do you live there?’ But now I understand that the answer is not simple and it doesn’t come easily.

Here in Zagreb we haven’t suffered severe casualties. Indeed, if you were to come here today you’d think that there was no war on. But that would be an illusion. The war is also here, it just affects us in a different way. At first there is a feeling of bewilderment. The war is like a monster, a mythical creature coming from somewhere far away. Somehow you refuse to believe that the creature has anything to do with your life, you try to convince yourself that everything will remain as

it was, that your life will not be affected, even as you feel it closing in around you. Finally the monster grabs you by the throat. You breathe in death, it impregnates your sleep with nightmare visions of dismembered bodies, you begin to picture your own end.

As the war goes on you create a parallel reality: on one side you neurotically cling to what used to be your everyday routine, pretending normality, ignoring the war. On the other side you are unable to deny the deep changes in your life and yourself, the shift in your values, emotions, reactions and behaviour. (Can I buy shoes, does it make any sense? Am I allowed to fall in love?) In war, the way you think of your life and what is essential to it totally changes. The simplest things no longer have the same weight or meaning. That is when you really know the war is on, that it has got to you too.

I used to think that war finally reached you through fear, the terror that seizes your whole being: wild heartbeats exploding, a wave of cold sweat, when there is no longer any division between mind and body, and no help. But war is more perverse.

It doesn't stop with the realization of your victimization, it goes deeper than that. War pushes you to the painful point where you are forced to realize and acknowledge the way you participate in it, become its accomplice. It may be a seemingly ordinary situation that makes you aware that you have become a collaborator – a thoughtless remark about why a refugee friend still needs high-heeled shoes, whatever.

War also heightens your awareness of the outside world. Astonishment gives way to anger, then resignation at the way Europe perceives this war – 'ethnic conflict', 'ancient legacy of hatred and blood-shed'. In this way the West tells us, 'You are

not Europeans, not even Eastern Europeans. You are Balkans, mythological, wild, dangerous Balkans. Kill yourselves, if that is your pleasure. We don't understand what is going on there, nor do we have clear political interests to protect.'

The myth of Europe, of our belonging to the European family and culture, even as poor relations, is gone. We have been left alone with our newly-won independence, our new states, new symbols, new autocratic leaders, but with no democracy at all. We are left standing on a soil slippery with blood, engulfed in a war that will go on for God knows how long.

After a year of violence, with the dead numbering approximately 200,000, with many more wounded and over two million refugees flooding Europe, there came the story of the concentration camps. And all of a sudden in a thin desperate man behind barbed wire the world recognized not a Moslem, but a human being. That picture, the words 'concentration camp' and 'holocaust' finally translated the true meaning of 'ethnic cleansing'. At last people in the West began to grasp what was going on. It was suddenly clear that Europe hadn't learnt its lesson, that history always repeats itself and that someone is always a Jew. Once the concept of 'otherness' takes root, the unimaginable becomes possible. Not in some mythological country but to ordinary urban citizens, as I discovered all too painfully.

Finally, a few of words about this book. This is not the book about the war as we see it every day on our television screens or read about it in the newspapers. *Balkan Express* picks up where the news stops, it fits somewhere in between hard facts and analysis and personal stories, because the war is happening not only at the front, but everywhere and to us all. I am speaking

about the other, less visible side of war, the way it changes us slowly from within. If my short half-stories, half-essays are to convey anything to the reader, it is this: the change in values, in one's way of thinking, one's perception of the world, that occurs on the inner side of war – a change that overtakes the inner self until one can scarcely recognize oneself any longer.

Unable as I was to separate myself from this war, the reader will undoubtedly notice inconsistencies in my own views, opinions and emotions. I don't apologize for that, because this is precisely what I wanted to write about. I offer only one piece of background information: the stories were written between April 1991 and May 1992, and are presented in more or less chronological order. They started as a few irregular contributions to various magazines and newspapers (*The Nation*, *New Statesman and Society*, *Die Zeit*, *Time*), but as the war came closer the urge to write about it and nothing else grew stronger and stronger. I ended up writing a book because, in spite of everything, I still believe in the power of words, in the necessity of communication. This is the only thing I know I believe in now.

ZAGREB
JUNE 1992

DINNER AT THE HARVARD CLUB

I'm going home, I think as the plane takes off above the Atlantic and, hovering for a brief moment above the slanted picture of Manhattan, dives upwards into the fluffy milky-white clouds. The sky above the clouds is crystal blue and so calm it seems almost indifferent. It would be wonderful to stay up there and coast awhile in the cool expanse of the azure void. I have just lost my link with land, the land beneath me and my own land to which I am about to return.

Only ten days have passed since I left. In these ten days another twelve people have been killed. The accumulating deaths make the wall dividing us from Europe and the world even higher and more formidable, placing us not only on the other side of the border but on the other side of reason too. This is why going back to my country – is it still called Yugoslavia? – this time feels different, more difficult than ever before: the word 'home' sticks in my throat, as if I would choke on it if I tried to say it out loud. I know that I'm going to be plunged deep into a black soupy tar, turgid and clammy, into the everyday which nobody understands any more. Already it is tugging at me from afar with long, thin tentacles.

Only last night I was having dinner in the elegant club of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in a Victorian building with mahogany-panelled drawing-rooms adorned with crystal chandeliers, thick burgundy-red carpets and mouldings on the ceilings. In this other reality where everything is logical, familiar and open to explanation, life runs smoothly as if governed by a huge, invisible, precise mechanism. After the first course – salad with walnuts and Roquefort dressing – my friends, considerate as they are, asked with concern about the situation. What is really going on? Will Yugoslavia fall apart? Will there be a civil war? ‘You know,’ my American friend, fiftyish, well-educated and well-informed, said apologetically, ‘our press doesn’t cover the events in your country regularly and when, after a month or two, a new article on Yugoslavia is published, the reader has already lost the thread.’ I remembered the article in that morning’s *New York Times* with a title perplexing in its ignorance: *Two Yugoslav factions blame each other for deaths in the conflict*. It was another in a whole series of articles which keep on repeating that Zagreb is the capital of Croatia, and Serbia and Croatia are the two largest of the six republics. And of course they published another map of Yugoslavia, not much bigger than a postage stamp, on which the rebel region around Knin appeared to cover nearly half of Croatia.

Silent-footed waiters brought salmon steaks in sauce Provençale with fried onions. We were eating, but somehow absent-mindedly. For a while my friends’ questions seemed to bob in the air above the dinner plates and the tender, pinkish meat. There was nothing else for me to do but reach for a piece of paper from my purse and draw a map, somewhat different from the one in the *New York Times*, but a map nevertheless,

with republics and provinces, with Zagreb and Belgrade, with the Adriatic Sea, Knin and Borovo Selo. I really wanted them to understand this immensely complicated political situation. They wanted to understand, too. We bent our heads over the piece of paper with the roughly sketched contours of a country which was about to disappear; it was vanishing right in front of our very eyes, sensing that its tragedy could no longer be contained in words. I talked until my voice grew faint – the salmon steaks were getting cold and a thin skin was forming on the sauce – while my friends tried to trace the intricate line of causes and consequences, consequences and causes, as if that still mattered or as if knowing could change anything.

The situation seems symbolic: in a rich people's club, with soft background glissandos on the harp being played by a fragile-looking lady of uncertain age, over coconut ice-cream decorated with raspberries and weak, decaffeinated coffee, my hosts nod their heads over the Balkan tragedy. Of course they understand what it is all about, but their understanding – as well as everybody else's – reaches only a certain point. So far as some logic of events can be discerned and explained so good; we are still within the realm of reason. But finally there must and does come the question why, which is the hardest to answer because there are hundreds of answers to it, none of them good enough. No graphics, drawings or maps can be of any genuine help, because the burden of the past – symbols, fears, national heroes, mythologies, folksongs, gestures and looks, everything that makes up the irrational and, buried deep in our subconscious, threatens to erupt any day now – simply cannot be explained. I see the interest and concern on the faces of my friends being replaced by weariness and then resignation.

At that moment I can easily imagine the face of a Bush or a

Mitterrand, a Kohl or a Major, at first eagerly paying attention to the report given by an expert consultant who comes from this part of the world over the plate of clear bouillon and then perhaps some light plain-cooked white fish, only to shake his head wearily at the end of the dinner, lifting a silver spoon of slightly quivering *crème caramel*, admitting that he cannot understand, not fully, that madness, the Balkan nightmare. The consultant – a man tied to the war-plagued country by duty or by birth – feels that he is faced with a lack of understanding not only across the table but somehow across time. And while Mitterrand thoughtfully sips his *Cointreau* and then gently wipes the beads of perspiration on his upper lip with a napkin, the consultant or minister realizes that his thoughts are already somewhere else and that his indifference unmistakably accounts for his exceptional, almost excessive politeness.

Can any of them, any of my benevolent friends and concerned Western politicians, any of those journalists who curse their bad luck for having to report from a country where there is no simple, clear-cut division into good guys and bad, can any of those people understand how it feels to be going back to the unknown: the nausea, the cramp in the stomach, the agonizing sensation of being overwrought, ill, depressed? I only know what to expect in my own home – hysterical ringing of the phone, unpaid bills, friends with whom I can talk about one thing only, because everything else seems inappropriate, because everything personal has been wiped out, and endless news, news, news... Everything else is a frightening uncertainty. When the roads are blocked and railways, shops and cars are being blown up, when Serbs from Slavonia are fleeing across the Danube into Vojvodina on ferries and the Croats may be using the same ferries to flee to this side, when

the village of Kijevo in Croatia is isolated and the Federal Army blocked at Lištica, all plans and all thoughts about the future (holidays, summer vacations, travel) become pointless. I feel that for all of us the future is being gradually suspended and this seems to be the most dangerous thing. The irrational that dwells in each of us is being unleashed from its chain and nobody can control it any more. Nobody is secure. In what way am I, a Croat, less threatened and in less danger than my acquaintance, a Serbian, who is now moving back to Eastern Bosnia? In no way, because the demons in us have already made people perceive themselves as nothing but parts of the national being. 'The Serbs must be slaughtered,' says a twelve-year-old child from my neighbourhood playing with the bread-knife. His mother slaps his face, while the other grown-ups around the table lower their eyes, aware that they are to blame for his words. The boy, of course, is only playing. At the same time, children his age in Belgrade are probably not playing cops and robbers any more – they are also playing at what should be done to Croats. If there is any future at all, I am afraid of the time to come. A time when these boys, if this lasts, might do just that.

ZAGREB
APRIL 1991

MY FATHER'S PISTOL

Everyone here says that we are at war now, but I still hesitate to use this word. It brings back to mind my father's Beretta pistol that he brought home with him after World War II. Why did he show it to me and my brother when we were only nine and five years old? I suppose because it would be dangerous if we found it on our own. I remember how he took it from the top of an old oak cupboard in the bedroom, and unwrapped it from its soft white cloth. He took the pistol in his hand with a strange expression, then allowed us to hold it for a moment. It felt heavy and cold. Pretending that I was playing, I pointed it at my little brother. 'Boom-boom!' I wanted to say, but when I looked at my father's face I froze. He was as white as a sheet, as if in that instant he had recognized a familiar phantom, a long forgotten ghost of war. He took the Beretta from me. 'Never,' he said, 'not even in a play, do that again. Don't touch weapons. Remember, sooner or later guns bring death. I ought to know, I've been through the War.'

My father joined Tito's partisan army in 1942, when he was twenty, and this was one of the very few occasions he ever mentioned the War. He was not of the kind to tell anecdotes,